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ABSTRACT

The challenge of preparing young people for employment and facilitating the smooth transition from school to work has spurred the enactment of the federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA), in May 1994. The intent of STWOA is to establish a national framework in which states can create work- and school-based learning systems that include activities to match students with employers. Community colleges play an integral role as facilitators of effective school-to-work systems in three ways: as a primary link between secondary and post-secondary education; by offering transition programs such as tech prep and cooperative and career education; and via collaborations with employers, the community, government, and labor organizations. Community colleges can strengthen the pathways between high school and higher education by coordinating courses of study at both levels; incorporating career exploration and decision-making into the curriculum; providing instruction in work attitudes, communication, and critical thinking skills; emphasizing continuous self-improvement in courses; and building upon existing job skills. Issues remain, however, regarding the grass-roots implementation of school-to-work programs, including what business' liability will be for student apprentices; who will pay for consistent assessment and outcomes measurement; who will set accountability standards and how they will be measured; and how employer-driven, work-bsed learning opportunities for young people will be ensured. (KP)

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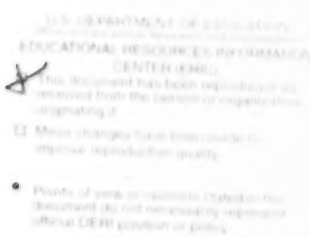

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Digest

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Community Colleges as Facilitators of School-To-Work

by Frankie Santos Laanan

Advanced technologies, heightened international competition, and volatile market economies contribute to an ever-changing work environment that is demanding increasingly broader skills and technological competencies of the American workforce. Unfortunately, a large proportion of young people entering the workforce today are not properly prepared to meet the current demands of the unpredictable work environment.

The challenge of preparing young people for employment and facilitating the smooth transition from school to work spurred the enactment of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, signed by President Clinton on May 4, 1994. The main purpose and congressional intent of the STWOA is to "establish a national framework within which all States can create statewide School-to-Work Opportunities systems" (STWOA, 1994, Sec.1). The STWOA defines a school-to-work system as a network of key players that combines three central elements.

1. **Work-Based Learning** - the incorporation of work experience, workplace mentoring, and industry-specific skills into a sequential program of skill mastery and job training.
2. **School-Based Learning** - the integration of academic and vocational curriculum.
3. **Connecting Activities** - the implementation of bridging activities that match students with employers, link secondary with postsecondary education, and assist students to acquire additional training.

Of all educational institutions, community colleges are in the unique position to respond directly to the STWOA mandates for work-based and school-based learning, and connecting activities. This digest discusses the critical role community colleges play in meeting the mandates of the legislation and facilitating the development of effective school-to-work systems. Issues community colleges face in school-to-work implementation are also discussed.

Community Colleges as Facilitators

Community colleges play an integral role as facilitators of effective school-to-work systems. Throughout their history they have incorporated the three components mentioned above and they do it in three ways.

First, community colleges serve as the primary link between secondary and postsecondary education.

Second, they offer creative transition programs such as tech prep, apprenticeships, cooperative education, and career education.

Third, community colleges collaborate with employers, community, government, and labor organizations.

The challenge community colleges face is to refine and strengthen effective programs and strategies in these three areas and to develop new and creative approaches where they are needed.

The Secondary - Postsecondary Link

The secondary-postsecondary educational link is essential to any school-to-work system. By the year 2000, an estimated 75% of jobs will require education or training beyond high school (Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring, 1992; American Association for Community Colleges, 1993). Community colleges offer low-cost, quality postsecondary education which provides individuals the opportunity to acquire skills necessary to move from school to work easily. Community colleges can strengthen the pathways between high school and higher education by:

- Coordinating high school and community college courses of study;
- Continuing to incorporate career awareness, exploration, and decision making into the curriculum;
- Providing instruction in work attitudes, communication and critical thinking skills;
- Emphasizing students' continuous self-improvement in courses; and
- Building upon existing job skills (California Community Colleges, 1993; Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring, 1992).

Transition Programs

Significant changes are also required in the relationship between the classroom and the workplace, and applied and academic learning. This includes setting and meeting the academic and technical standards set by the National Education Standards and Improvement Council and the National Skill Standards Board. Transition programs with which many people are already familiar such as tech-prep education, school-to-apprenticeship, cooperative education, business-education contracts, and career academies are spearheading these changes and are potentially the foundations on which school-to-work systems will be built (United States Department of Education, 1994b).

The function of opening career pathways by means of these various transition programs is particularly suited to community colleges. Community colleges have consistently viewed career education as a means of providing the academic education and occupational training students need to meet workplace skill demands. Underscored by policymakers within job training programs as well as by employers is the importance of students possessing occupational skills, along with basic skills in mathematics, reading, and writing (Carnevale and Gainer, 1989). School-to-work transition programs at community colleges can develop employability skills by integrating academic and

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vocational education, and by establishing or expanding job training programs with local businesses and industry. Jacobs (1993) asserts that vocational and general education professionals must create new approaches that successfully bridge the two.

Tech prep education is an example of a highly visible community college strategy for building a school-to-work system. The principles and practices of tech prep involve the key elements mandated in STWOA such as offering opportunities for direct entry into the workplace and providing a career path. However, in order to play a stronger role in establishing a national network of school-to-work systems, the United States Department of Education (1994) suggests five areas of improvement for tech prep:

1. Clarify the "message" that tech prep is for all students;
2. Incorporate nationally recognized skill standards (i.e., SCANS);
3. Make career guidance and counseling an important part of the program;
4. Strengthen employer involvement; and
5. Encourage professional development opportunities.

Many of the above suggestions for enhancing tech prep can also be applied to other transition programs at community colleges.

Partnerships with Community Sectors

Community colleges are recognized for their existing partnerships with the community and business. In order for school-to-work programs to be successful, all sectors of the community must collaborate on innovative ways to meet shared and individual needs. Community sector partnerships at local and state levels serve as the driving force in planning and implementing the operation of school-to-work systems and their programs.

The major players in forming school-to-work programs include schools, employers, and labor and community-based organizations. The potential roles of the various sectors have been outlined in an information bulletin by the United States Department of Education (1994).

The role of high schools and community colleges is to connect educators with business, explore innovative curricula, and invest in the professional development of teachers, counselors, and administrators. Employers' role includes developing courses that prepare students for highly skilled jobs, hiring qualified graduates of school-to-work programs, and reinforcing what is learned in the classroom. Labor organizations can assist in planning and offering high-quality training and work experience. They can also provide employment information and collaborate with state and local officials on employment opportunities. The role of community-based organizations is to plan programs that reach all youth and serve as a mediator between sectors.

Finally, the role of community colleges is to bring all these sectors together to form effective school-to-work systems. Partnerships among the sectors are critical to the success of the enterprise and community colleges have the experience to effectively carry this out.

Some Issues to Consider

Since the passage of the STWOA in 1994, organizations, community college administrators, and interested parties have communicated and exchanged information via the Internet. The discussions occurring on-line reflect some of the salient issues at the grass-roots level that community college professionals are grappling with. Highlights of some of the issues include the following.

Liability. What is the company's legal liability for student apprentices and students in training?

Costs. Consistent assessment, outcomes measurement, and communication networks are expensive to maintain. What happens after the initial implementation funding expires?

Accountability. How will accountability be measured? Who controls the standards for accountability--employers or educators?

Ensuring Quality. How do community college school-to-work educators and professionals ensure that there are employer-driven, structured work-based learning opportunities for young people?

These are a few of the issues that are currently being discussed. As school-to-work initiatives progress others will arise. Community colleges, employers, government, and community-based organizations will continue to be challenged by issues like the ones presented and others yet unknown.

Conclusion

With continued effort toward establishing a secondary-postsecondary link, effective transition programs, and collaborative partnerships, community colleges are becoming the facilitators of school-to-work systems. They are the catalysts that will bring education and business together. The challenges of the 21st century need community colleges to tackle the issues that arise collectively with secondary education, employers, labor, and community organizations in order to succeed in this national effort. An educated, highly skilled, and efficient workforce benefits our economic system, our workforce, and ultimately our citizenry.

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